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Hawthorne's Literary Theory

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## XVII

### HAWTHORNE'S LITERARY THEORY

LIKE every original artist, Hawthorne may be approached in a variety of ways, and each of these ways will add something to the ultimate picture of his mind and art. Most of the work that scholars have done on Hawthorne, however, has been historical and biographical, and the result has been that Hawthorne the artist and thinker has been relegated to the background.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly regrettable when one remembers that he was the most complete artist of the New England renaissance, and in *The Scarlet Letter* the author of a book which as art transcends all other American novels. It is to fill out the contemporary conception of Hawthorne that his theory of art is here considered as it may be pieced together from allegory, preface, and chance remark. Focusing attention on his ideals in art makes certain the meaning of the prefaces, and an investigation of his doctrine of the artist gives an insight into his method of achieving his ideal. In brief, to study Hawthorne's literary theory is to discover the intellectual basis of his art, and to see his work from the inside is to arrive at a fresh sense of his intention. It was Goethe's conviction that the critic should first of all ask what the author had intended. If the following investigation makes for clarity, it should furnish an opportunity for a new appraisal of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

I. Although Hawthorne's prefaces have been reprinted often, they are enigmatic considered in themselves. Before approaching them with understanding, it is necessary to be aware of Hawthorne's ideal in the use of imagination, his sense of the limitations of the novel, and his philosophy of art. For this reason "The Hall of Fantasy" (1843), written when Hawthorne was tiring of short fiction and contemplating the possibilities of the novel, is very important, however esoteric it may seem.

The most significant item in this allegory, perhaps, is one with which Hawthorne spends little time—"the rulers and demi-gods in the realm of imagination" in niches and on pedestals around the hall. They are Homer, Aesop, Dante, Ariosto, Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Bunyan.<sup>1a</sup> These figures, it will be seen, except for

<sup>1</sup> This paper was accepted before F. O. Matthiessen's chapters on Hawthorne in *American Renaissance* were available for consideration.

<sup>1a</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 241, "The Hall of Fantasy." All references in this paper are to *The Complete Writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Old Manse edition (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1900). This edition is more nearly complete than the Riverside. Hawthorne in the version of "The Hall of Fantasy" published in *The Pioneer* mentions Alcott, Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, and Poe, but his remarks are valuable chiefly from a biographical standpoint. See Harold P. Miller's article on the subject, "Hawthorne Surveys his Contemporaries," *American Literature* (May, 1940), pp. 228-235.

Aesop, Ariosto, and Bunyan, are those one would expect to find in any list of the masters of imagination. But to pass over the exceptions would be to throw away the key to the whole group. The presence of such a writer as Aesop indicates that the list was not merely arbitrary, and and suggests the common denominator of allegory and symbolism found in all. Hawthorne, to be sure, does not call attention to the allegoric elements in Shakespeare or to Homer's story of Penelope's web, or to Circe's enchantments, which he retold in *A Wonder Book*,<sup>2</sup> but it seems more than likely that the smaller writers tell us the quality which he found particularly praiseworthy in the rest.

This fact is at the basis of Hawthorne's theory and practice. Hawthorne's originality, like that of every artist, consists in the adaptation he made of his preference, in the manner in which he passed from a center of admiration to a circumference of emulation; and it is in the realization of his point of departure that his theory takes on meaning. When he writes, for instance, that the world requires "a deeper moral, and a closer and homelier truth" than is supplied by Scott and Dickens,<sup>3</sup> he has obviously in mind the rich spiritual significance of his favorites, Spenser, Milton, and Bunyan. This admiration for allegory is also doubtless behind the remark he made in his notebooks after seeing the pass of the Trossachs and realizing that Scott had handled the scene with considerable freedom. "Nature," he wrote, "is better no doubt, but Nature cannot be exactly reproduced on canvas or in print; and the artist's only resource is to substitute something that may stand instead of and suggest the truth."<sup>4</sup>

These statements, the first made in 1845, the second in 1857, come after Hawthorne had established his practice in *Twice-Told Tales*, and may be regarded as voicing the limitations he sensed from the first in conventional fiction. Taken together, they suggest in large measure his literary theory. Doubtless his life-long conviction was that which he put into the mouth of Hilda in *The Marble Faun*, that the highest merit of art is suggestiveness.<sup>5</sup> He wished for something more subtle in respect to both content and form than was furnished by, let us say, *The Pickwick Papers*, and something more beautiful. "If art," he wrote, "had not strayed away from its legitimate paths and aims, it ought to soften and sweeten the

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, XIII, "Circe's Palace," pp. 366-410.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, v, "P's Correspondence," p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, XX, pp. 402-403, *Notes of Travel*, II.

<sup>5</sup> *Works*, x, p. 237, *The Marble Faun*, II. See, for instance, *Works*, VII, p. xxiii, "Author's Preface," *The House of The Seven Gables*: "When romances do really teach anything, or produce any effective operation, it is usually through a far more subtle process than the ostensible one."

lives of its worshippers, in even a more exquisite degree than the contemplation of natural objects.”<sup>6</sup>

Much has been said of Hawthorne’s preoccupation with moral truths; not enough of the insistence on beauty implied in this last quotation. It is sometimes forgotten that Hawthorne entitled his chief allegory on art “The Artist of the Beautiful.” Mrs. Hawthorne has undoubtedly caught her husband’s spirit when she writes that he suffered from any failure in beauty, physical, moral or intellectual, and remarked one day with “infinite joy,” taking a half-bloomed rose in his hand, “This is perfect. On earth a flower only can be perfect.”<sup>7</sup> Beauty alone seemed to him worthy of immortality,<sup>8</sup> and beauty in his estimation was not a matter of size. It might be as perfectly developed in microscopic space “as within the ample verge that is measured by the arc of the rainbow.”<sup>9</sup> Its chief components seem to have been vitality and loftiness. Drowne’s carvings, with the exception of his masterpiece, it will be remembered, show deficiency of no “attribute to render them really works of art, except that deep quality, be it of soul or intellect, which bestows life upon the lifeless and warmth upon the cold,”<sup>10</sup> and Drowne receives Copley’s praise only when like another Pygmalion he has made a living statue. In “Fancy’s Show Box,” Hawthorne indicated the high degree of vitality he desired by ascribing greater liveliness to the creative imagination than to the imagination of the criminal, since to give the reader a sense of reality, the writer must see his incidents more as truth than as fiction or daydream not likely to be executed.<sup>11</sup> But Hawthorne was not content merely with vitality. In “A Select Party,” he compared the meteors that lighted the guests to “the brilliancy of a powerful yet chastened imagination—a light which seemed to hide whatever was unworthy to be noticed and give effect to every beautiful and noble attribute.”<sup>12</sup> A sentiment similar to this, yet pointing even higher, occurs in *The Marble Faun* when Hawthorne likens Miriam’s studio to a poet’s imagination because of its “half developed hints of beings and objects grander and more beautiful than we can anywhere find in reality.”<sup>13</sup>

This comparison reveals the final quality which distinguished Hawthorne’s conception of art from that of the great English novelists. Subtlety, truth and beauty are noble ideals Hawthorne shared with other

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> *Works*, xxi, pp. 267–268, *Notes of Travel*, iii.

<sup>8</sup> *Works*, xviii, p. 441, *American Notebooks*.

<sup>9</sup> *Works*, v, p. 294, “The Artist of the Beautiful.”

<sup>10</sup> *Works*, v, pp. 91–92, “Drowne’s Wooden Image.”

<sup>11</sup> *Works*, i, p. 305, “Fancy’s Show Box.”

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 80, “A Select Party.”

<sup>13</sup> *Works*, ix, p. 51, *The Marble Faun*.

writers of fiction; but in aspiring to make an art more beautiful than nature, an art which suggested another realm of truth, Hawthorne stood almost alone in his time. In at least two of his allegories, he hinted at his ideal. In "The Great Stone Face," for instance, he described a poetry which surpassed both natural object and human being. The poet made a mightier grandeur visible in the mountain than had ever been seen there before,<sup>14</sup> and the common man and woman were glorified when "he beheld them in his mood of poetic faith."<sup>15</sup> Thus the world, Hawthorne wrote, assumes a better aspect from the hour the poet blesses it with his eyes. Indeed one may say, "Creation was not finished till the poet came to interpret, and so complete it."<sup>16</sup> Those who thought the beauty resulting from this idealization a lie were plastered up out of nature's refuse "after all the swine were made. As respects all things else, the poet's ideal was the truest truth."<sup>17</sup> When we put this together with Owen Warland's aspiration to produce "a beauty that should attain to the ideal which Nature has proposed to herself in all her creatures, but has never taken pains to realize,"<sup>18</sup> we see that Hawthorne's theory of art was not unlike the idealistic theory of the Greeks. Like Sophocles, Hawthorne aimed at an idealization which was not a beautiful realm of escape from actuality but was actuality shaped so that it was universal truth. Hester Prynne, for all her difference of circumstance and conviction, is not unlike Antigone; and that Hawthorne should create such a character is to be explained in terms of his theory of idealization and his belief that

The artist—the true artist—must look beneath the exterior. It is his gift—his proudest, but often a melancholy one—to see the inmost soul, and, by a power indefinable even to himself, to make it glow or darken upon the canvas, in glances that express the thought and sentiment of years.<sup>19</sup>

Hawthorne's ideal in art apparently had its roots in allegory and took first and last certain qualities from the ground in which it grew; but growing strong it grew straight and approached the norm of classicism.<sup>20</sup>

II. In the light of what we have examined of Hawthorne's literary theory, it is possible to come to terms with his doctrine in the prefaces respecting externals. There is little or no change apparent on this point from the introductory remarks in "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844) to the

<sup>14</sup> *Works*, III, p. 54, "The Great Stone Face."

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Works*, v, p. 316, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, I, p. 236, "The Prophetic Pictures."

<sup>20</sup> Austin Warren notes Hawthorne's classicism in the concluding paragraph of his introduction to *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1934). He suggests that Hawthorne attempted by his definition of Romance something analogous to Aristotle's definition of poetry as more philosophical than history.

conclusion of *The Marble Faun* (1860). First and last, Hawthorne's program was, as he wrote in the preface to "Rappaccini's Daughter," to content himself "with a very slight embroidery of outward manners,—the faintest possible counterfeit of real life," and rely for interest on "some less obvious peculiarity of the subject."<sup>21</sup> The writer of the romance, we learn in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, "has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation";<sup>22</sup> Brook Farm was chosen as the scene of *The Blithedale Romance* because it was a little removed from life, a possible substitute for Fairyland;<sup>23</sup> *The Marble Faun* had Italy for its site "as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct,"<sup>24</sup> and the characters were intended to be "artfully and airily removed from our mundane sphere."<sup>25</sup>

Undoubtedly, Hawthorne's belief that allegory was the highest use of the imagination lay at the root of these sentiments. Liberated by Spenser and Bunyan from the tradition of English fiction, he saw no good reason why prose should not handle external reality with poetic freedom. It was a source of artistic grief to him, however, that America as yet afforded no such Fairyland as was found in the Old Countries, "an atmosphere of strange enchantment, beheld through which the inhabitants have a propriety of their own."<sup>26</sup> He sought therefore the nearest approximations he could find in scenes apart from the common experience of his readers, seventeenth-century America, a strange corner of Salem, Brook Farm, Italy. Given thus some leeway in the handling of scene, he was free to make the natural world a mirror of character and to reshape it to demonstrate the abiding truths of human experience on an ideal plane. As he wrote Bridge, "there is no harm, but on the contrary, good, in arraying some of the ordinary facts of life in a slightly idealized and artistic guise."<sup>27</sup>

"David Swan" and "The Ambitious Guest" illustrate as well as any of the tales Hawthorne's method of idealizing ordinary facts. In the first of these, by compressing into a single afternoon and into the experience of a single man, events that might well belong to several persons and several days, Hawthorne achieves in the manner of Greek drama something typical of human experience, and is able to suggest the strong hand

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, IV, p. 126, "Rappaccini's Daughter."

<sup>22</sup> *Works*, VII, p. xxi, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

<sup>23</sup> *Works*, VII, p. xxx, *The Blithedale Romance*.

<sup>24</sup> *Works*, IX, p. xxii, *The Marble Faun*, I.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, X, p. 353, *The Marble Faun*, II.

<sup>26</sup> *Works*, VIII, p. xxx, *The Blithedale Romance*.

<sup>27</sup> *Works*, III, p. xx, "Dedicatory letter to Horatio Bridge."

of providence in human life. In "The Ambitious Guest," the unfortunate coincidence which happened to the Wiley family becomes through Hawthorne's idealization a dark drama of fate. All members of the family are ambitious and their young guest is ambition itself. The catastrophe when it arrives, therefore, is the punishment of *hubris* by *Nemesis*, and the perfection of the action illustrates "the ideal which Nature has proposed . . . but has never taken pains to realize."<sup>28</sup>

Idealization is the key to *The Scarlet Letter*, and the other romances, for each is an attempt to make a "drama truer than history" illustrative of some universal truth. This is obvious to anyone who reflects on these works, but the allegories and sketches may seem to be wrought in a different fashion. Actually, however, the same method of reshaping events and materials until they take on the guise of truth universal and poetically beautiful is at work in even the most abstruse of the allegories and in the sketches. "Feathertop," a strange tale of a witchwoman's scarecrow who comes to life, is, for instance, not a simple fantasy but a study in superficiality; and in making his chief character an actual "man of straw," an actual "pumpkinhead," Hawthorne is idealizing into a single figure all the scattered stupidities of mankind. Such semi-realistic sketches as "Snowflakes," "Night Sketches" and "The Old Apple Dealer," which stand apparently at the opposite extreme from such a fanciful piece as "Feathertop" show the same attempt to idealize human experience. "Snowflakes" is the essence of winter days, and "Night Sketches" is an epitome of all evening walks in the rain. "The Old Apple Dealer" and "Sights from a Steeple," unexcelled in the perfection with which they render reality, are far from transcriptions of life. A Rembrandt portrait suggestive of all the living dead is achieved in the first by selection and development; "Sights from a Steeple" is a landscape in words shaped in such a fashion that at the close one sees that it is a picture of life. Hawthorne's work is various, but it derives unity from a single intent, to carry out the tendencies of nature in an imaginative realm.

Hawthorne did not, of course, intend that any of his work should be taken as a grotesquerie, however novel it might be. He used the method of poetic idealization because he thought that it revealed most efficiently the *ethos* of human character. The romance, he insisted, "sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truths of the human heart,"<sup>29</sup> and in a letter to Bridge he spoke of himself as "burrowing, to his utmost ability, into the depths of our common nature, for the purposes of psychological romance."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is evident on almost every page of his

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, v, p. 316, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>29</sup> *Works*, vii, p. xxi, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

<sup>30</sup> *Works*, iii, p. xx, "Dedicatory letter to Horatio Bridge."



works that not simply beauty, but a beauty that was truth was the goal of his art. It is this aim combined with rare talent that makes *The Scarlet Letter* and his best tales abiding literature.

One evidence of this talent is his use of symbolism to portray character. He used this technique, it seems likely, for the same reason that he used a fireside chair in "Grandfather's Chair" to give "the hues of life" to "the shadowy outlines of . . . men and women" by connecting their images with "a substantial and homely reality."<sup>31</sup> At any rate, Hawthorne does not employ Spenser's free association where Idleness rides on an ass, Gluttony on a swine, Lechery on a goat.<sup>32</sup> Rather, he relies on objects naturally associated with his characters to reveal their inner qualities. Such are the Great Stone Face, so like Ernest's own in nobility; the exotic flower Zenobia wears, symbolic of her rich and exciting beauty; Westervelt's false teeth, which suggest that he is a sham; Hester's scarlet letter; and Lady Eleanor's mantle, which points to her proud isolation as she wraps it about her shoulders, and which in being the source of the plague punishes her with ostracism. Few writers, if any, have shown such genius as Hawthorne in making objects, insignificant in themselves, take on a rich burden of meaning as symbols.

Some of these symbols are highly specialized. The black veil of the Reverend Mr. Hooper is a riddle until it is gradually revealed that he wears it as a melancholy reminder to men of the veils they wear to each other. An even more subtle symbol is the mechanical butterfly of "The Artist of the Beautiful," which in addition to serving its purposes in the allegory may indicate Hawthorne's ideal in the use of this technique. It will be remembered that Owen Warland is throughout the story of his life associated with the butterfly. He spends his days in the chase of the bright creature, "an apt emblem of the ideal pursuit in which he had spent so many golden hours."<sup>33</sup> A least once, he is recalled to himself from materialism by its presence,<sup>34</sup> and his life work is, in making a butterfly, "to put the very spirit of beauty into form and give it motion."<sup>35</sup> The significant detail may well be the manner in which Hawthorne terminates the allegory by having the butterfly represent "the intellect, the sensibility, the soul of an Artist of the Beautiful"<sup>36</sup>—subject to diminution like the artist's own at the nearness of Peter Hovenden and crushed by the child born of the union of Anne and Robert Danforth. In view of

<sup>31</sup> *Works*, xii, p. xxiii.

<sup>32</sup> *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto 4.—This is not to say that Hawthorne was not influenced in his use of symbolism by Spenser. Randall Stewart's excellent article, "Hawthorne and *The Faerie Queene*," PQ, xii, 196–206 (April, 1933), indicates Hawthorne's debt.

<sup>33</sup> *Works*, v, p. 304, "The Artist of the Beautiful." <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296. <sup>36</sup> *Works*, v, p. 324, "The Artist of the Beautiful."



Hawthorne's subtlety, it does not seem too much to believe that he recalled at this point the Greek association of Psyche or the soul with the butterfly, and thus in an allegory on art voiced his ideal in the use of symbolism: the symbol should become the individual associated with it.

It is evident that Hawthorne, like all true artists, was not completely satisfied with his practice. He felt that he occupied an "unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists . . . and the great body of pen-and-ink men who address the intellect and sympathies of the multitude."<sup>37</sup> He was a fictionist unacceptable to the "spirutual or metaphysical requisitions" of the few, and "too shadowy, and unsubstantial in his modes of development"<sup>38</sup> for the many. He wondered, for instance, how the *Twice-Told Tales* gained the vogue they did:

They have the pale tint of flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade . . . Instead of passion there is sentiment; and, even in what purport to be pictures of actual life, we have allegory, not always so warmly dressed in its habiliments of flesh and blood as to be taken into the reader's mind without a shiver.<sup>39</sup>

His "inveterate love of allegory," he wrote in the guise of an editor of "Rappaccini's Daughter", "is apt to invest his plots and characters with the aspect of scenery and people in the clouds, and to steal away the human warmth out of his conceptions."<sup>40</sup> This discontent is apparent even in his reflection on *The Scarlet Letter* and the possibilities there were of a novel in his custom house experience:

The wiser effort would have been to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of today, and thus to make it a bright transparency; to spiritualize the burden that began to weigh so heavily; to seek, resolutely the true and indestructable value that lay hidden in the petty and wearisome incidents, and ordinary characters, with which I was now conversant. The fault was mine . . . my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it.<sup>41</sup>

Late in life, he wrote Fields: "It is odd enough that my own individual taste is for another class of works than those which I myself am able to write . . . Have you ever read the novels of Anthony Trollope? . . . They precisely suit my taste."<sup>42</sup>

Hawthorne, of course, was right in feeling that much of his work had "the aspect of scenery and people in the clouds"; and it shows the health of his mind that he should wish that he had dealt more with the life around him. This is not to say, however, that Hawthorne is his own best

<sup>37</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 125, "Rappaccini's Daughter."      <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Works*, i, p. liv, "Author's Preface to *Twice-Told Tales*."

<sup>40</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 126, "Rappaccini's Daughter."

<sup>41</sup> *Works*, vi, pp. 52-53, "The Custom House."

<sup>42</sup> Fields, J. T., *Yesterdays with Authors*, p. 63 (Boston, 1871).

critic. His world has not the passion and turmoil of Smollett's or Fielding's world; there is something suggesting late summer or early autumn in the reflective cast of even his most objective writing. Yet therein lies its charm. One is constantly reminded of the line, "How sweet is melancholy . . ." As in reading the seventeenth century essayists, one becomes aware that the darkness of life has woven in it a gold thread or two, and all is food for meditation. This it should be noted is quite a different thing from romantic melancholy with its stormy protest and self-pity. Hawthorne's tragic insight led Paul Elmer More to compare him with Aeschylus. A more exact comparison would have been Sophocles, whose interest was not the cosmic problem but man. Be this as it may, Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, at least, rises to a modern equivalent of Greek tragedy. There is this difference, however: whereas the Greek tragedians achieve a bold, stern etching, Hawthorne makes a rich painting, filled with spots of color that are flowers or sunlight, which induces in us a deep hour of meditation.

III. In dealing with the artist and the processes of creation, Hawthorne showed balance indicative of his insight and sanity. Like Coleridge, he did not believe that genius consisted in some onesidedness of intellect or emotion, but in a conjunction of these two powers. The genius resulted, he wrote, when "a great heart burns as the household fire of a grand intellect."<sup>43</sup> Though his theory would seem to lead to a preoccupation with thought, he clearly stated his belief that a too exclusive use of fancy or intellect would run the risk, as it did in Shelley, of making the writer's page "a concrete arrangement of crystallizations, or even of icicles, as cold as they were brilliant."<sup>44</sup> His emphasis on the place of the heart as an avenue leading to truth in such allegories as "Earth's Holocaust," "The Hall of Fantasy," and "The Intelligence Office" shows that like Emerson and Alcott he approved Pascal's statement that "the heart has reasons which reason does not know." Hawthorne also respected the doctrine of inspiration, which was a favorite with the great Concordians. He objected to the Houses of Parliament because it was clear the architect had not in Emerson's phrase "builded better than he knew." The "crowning glory," Hawthorne felt, could only be achieved when the man was conscious of a power "higher and wiser than himself, making him its instrument."<sup>45</sup>

It is Hawthorne's doctrine of intellect, however, which leads us most deeply into his art. What he has to say of the place of thought in creation indicates for once and all the world of difference between him and a man like Poe, between him, indeed, and any of the clever men. Not a

<sup>43</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 90, "A Select Party."

<sup>44</sup> *Works*, v, p. 183, "P's Correspondence."

<sup>45</sup> *Works*, xix, pp. 416-417, *Notes of Travel*, I.

startling effect but a high and beautiful seriousness was the goal of art to Hawthorne. "An innate perception and reflection of truth," he wrote "give the only sort of originality that does not finally grow intolerable."<sup>46</sup> To Hawthorne, the rudiments of a poetic and imaginative mind, as he noted in the case of Edward Redclyffe, were "a brooding habit taking outward things into itself and imbuing them with its essence until, after they had lain there awhile, they assumed a relation both to truth and to himself, and became mediums to affect other minds with the magnetism of his own."<sup>47</sup> That this was Hawthorne's own method of work seems probable when one remembers the night walks in Salem, the path worn by him in his contemplative daily stroll on the ridge above the Wayside, and the speed attributed to him in composition.

By contemplation, Hawthorne sought not merely truth, but as would be expected from his ideal, beauty. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, he concluded his introduction of Hepzibah with the thought that life is made up of marble and mud and that "What is called poetic insight is the gift of discerning in this sphere of strangely mingled elements, the beauty and the majesty compelled to assume a garb so sordid."<sup>48</sup> It has always been the mark of the true poet to see goodness and beauty where common eyes could not, but it is only rarely that life's underlying strata of beauty are the chief concern of the artist. Hawthorne's profound meditation on these problems suggested by such a program is evidenced in a passage written late in life:

Facts, as we really find them, whatever poetry they may involve, are covered with a stony excrescence of prose resembling the crust on a beautiful seashell, and they never show their most delicate and divinest colors until we shall have dissolved away their grosser actualities by steeping them long in a powerful menstrum of thought. And seeking to actualize them again, we do but renew the crust. If this were otherwise,—if the moral sublimity of a great fact depended in any degree on its garb of external circumstances, things which change and decay,—it could not itself be immortal and ubiquitous, and only a brief point of time and a little neighborhood would be spiritually nourished by its grandeur and beauty.<sup>49</sup>

If Hawthorne was thus insistent on the need of contemplation, he did not believe that great art could be produced in an intellectual vacuum. Though truth and beauty were the aim, they should be vitally connected with the man and the man should serve his age. Drowne in "Drowne's Wooden Image" describes the creation of his masterpiece in this way:

<sup>46</sup> *Works*, xviii, p. 407, *The American Notebooks*.

<sup>47</sup> *Works*, xv, p. 124, *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*.

<sup>48</sup> *Works*, vii, p. 56, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

<sup>49</sup> *Works*, xi, p. 196, *Our Old Home*.

"A well-spring of inward wisdom gushed within me as I wrought upon the oak with my whole strength, and soul, and faith."<sup>50</sup> To Hawthorne, art demanded nothing short of all a man's powers "cultivated to the utmost, and exerted with the same prodigality as if he were speaking for a great party or for the nation at large on the floor of the Capitol."<sup>51</sup> The only way the artist could be known to posterity was by living truly and wisely for his own age, and if he showed distrust of his age, feared that it lacked the spiritual insight to receive his work worthily, he was deserving of distrust himself. The world was waiting to respond to the highest word which "the best child of time and immortality" could utter. Failure to be heard was the fault not of the world but of the artist.<sup>52</sup> This did not mean, however, that the artist should pamper the public so that it in turn would pamper him. The reward of all high performance was within itself.<sup>53</sup> "When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality."<sup>54</sup>

Such devotion to art in which the man was "insulated from the mass of human kind . . ." and " . . . had no aim—no pleasure—no sympathies—but what were ultimately connected with his art"<sup>55</sup> presupposed a thorough apprenticeship, both in learning the essentials of the work to be done and in developing the character necessary for any accomplishment. On this point Hawthorne was so insistent that he wrote a brief essay, "Hints to Young Ambition," the moral of which was in the motto,

The man in the moon  
Came down too soon.<sup>56</sup>

The chief enemies of worth-while achievement to Hawthorne seemed to be impatience and a love of fame. "Young men," he wrote, "seem to labor under the apprehension that the public cannot do without them, and that every year which they spend in preparatory discipline is so much time stolen from the community."<sup>57</sup> But the darkest in this dark picture is the fact that young men are eager for reputation without having done anything to deserve it,<sup>58</sup> and, trying all sorts of bypaths to "the temple of fame," finally "dwindle down into the most insignificant and contemptible of creatures."<sup>59</sup> Hawthorne saw only one way to achievement

<sup>50</sup> *Works*, v, pp. 98–99, "Drowne's Wooden Image."

<sup>51</sup> *Works*, v, p. 245, "Passages from a Relinquished Work."

<sup>52</sup> *Works*, v, p. 188, "P's Correspondence."

<sup>53</sup> *Works*, v, p. 326, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>54</sup> *Works*, v, p. 330, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>55</sup> *Works*, i, p. 241, "The Prophetic Pictures."

<sup>56</sup> *Works*, xvii, p. 239, "Hints to Young Ambition."

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>58</sup> *Works*, xvii, p. 242, "Hints to Young Ambition."

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

for the young man: "He must not only build up a character, but also give it time to consolidate and harden, before laying it open to the winds and storms of heaven."<sup>60</sup> It is to Hawthorne's credit that he not only gave such high counsels, but followed them himself in his much-misunderstood solitude in Salem, where he perfected his skill in short fiction. It was not so much the Puritan conscience as the artist conscience, it seems likely, that made Hawthorne in this period live an austere and solitary life.

Self reliance to Hawthorne was absolutely essential in the artist. "Great poets," he wrote, "should have iron sinews."<sup>61</sup> The passion for the beautiful and the consciousness of the power to create it look vain beside earthly might,<sup>62</sup> and "it is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character hardly compatible with its delicacy; he must keep his faith in himself while the incredulous world assails him with its utter disbelief; he must stand up against mankind and be his own sole disciple, both as respects his genius and the objects to which it is directed."<sup>63</sup> Written at the Old Manse, Concord, this passage suggests another reason beyond temperamental difference for Hawthorne's never having become a satellite in Emerson's broad heaven—indeed it suggests the probable reason for his never having joined any of the intellectual movements of his time. Hawthorne too thoroughly held Emerson's point of view to be a follower of Emerson, to be anything to anyone but Nathaniel Hawthorne. The artist, he felt, might learn something from the untutored reaction of the crowd,<sup>64</sup> but the only justification for another's interference in the process of creation was "the deepest and warmest sympathy that can co-exist between two perfectly independent perceptions." From such a relation, a friend might get "light enough upon the matter to throw some of it back from another point of view."<sup>65</sup> The attitude of the true artist was that of Drowne regarding rules: "Let others do what they may with marble and adopt what rules they choose. If I can produce my desired effect by painted wood, those rules are not for me, and I have a right to disregard them."<sup>66</sup>

Though Hawthorne emphasized this independence of the poet to the point of believing that at his highest the artist needed no human intercourse,<sup>67</sup> and though he separated him from other men by his conviction that bodily work and thought were incompatible,<sup>68</sup> Hawthorne did not

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–241.

<sup>61</sup> *Works*, v, p. 186, "P's Correspondence."

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>63</sup> *Works*, v, pp. 299–300, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>64</sup> *Works*, I, pp. 226–227, "The Prophetic Pictures."

<sup>65</sup> See *Hawthorne as Poetry Critic: six unpublished Letters to Lewis Mansfield*, Harold Blodgett, in *American Literature*, p. 180 (May, 1940).

<sup>66</sup> *Works*, v, p. 99, "Drowne's Wooden Image."

<sup>67</sup> *Works*, vii, p. 203, *The House of the Seven Gables*.

<sup>68</sup> *Works*, viii, pp. 91–92, *The Blithedale Romance*.

believe that the artist should or could live in an ivory tower. Donatello's experience with the darker realities was applicable to all men:

It was perceptible that he had already had glimpses of strange and subtle matters in those dark caverns, into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence. And when they emerge though dazzled and blinded by the first glare of daylight, they take truer and sadder views of life forever afterwards.<sup>69</sup>

Owen Warland's story Hawthorne meant to be typical of "the troubled life to those who strive to create the beautiful,"<sup>70</sup> and a troubled life it is as we watch Owen battle with the cold, hard, practical spirit of the world in Peter Hovenden and Robert Danforth and with his own emotional problems generated by his love for Anne and his disappointment. To Hawthorne the artist like all men must get wisdom largely at the price of suffering and be mellowed by the tempests. In "The Procession of Life," to be sure, he suggested that genius was "but a higher development of innate gifts common to all," and "perhaps . . . he whose genius appears deepest and truest excels his fellows in nothing save the knack of expression—he throws out occasionally a lucky hint of truths of which every human soul is profoundly, though unutterably, conscious."<sup>71</sup> But a large humanity, rather than some spectacular cleverness seemed to him more often the essence of genius that spoke to the hearts of men. This is the moral of "The Great Stone Face" where the palm is awarded not to the professional poet, but to Ernest, the profound and sincere human being, modeled, it is said, on Emerson:

Ernest began to speak, giving to the people of what was in his heart and mind. His words had power, because they accorded with his thoughts; and his thoughts had reality and depth, because they harmonized with the life which he had always lived. It was not mere breath that this preacher uttered; they were the words of life, because a life of good deeds and holy love was melted into them. Pearls, pure and rich, had been dissolved into this precious draught. The poet, as he listened, felt that the being and character of Ernest were a nobler strain of poetry than he had ever written.<sup>72</sup>

The emphasis on idealization in art did not lead Hawthorne to regard art as a realm independent of or superior to life. In "The New Adam and Eve," he warned the reader that art had become a second and stronger nature, a stepmother, "whose crafty tenderness has taught us to despise the bountiful and wholesome ministration of our true parent."<sup>73</sup> In "Earth's Holocaust," he could look on the burning of the great books without dismay and console a desperate bookseller in this manner:

<sup>69</sup> *Works*, x, pp. 70–71, *The Marble Faun*, II.

<sup>70</sup> *Works*, v, p. 313, "The Artist of the Beautiful."

<sup>71</sup> *Works*, iv, pp. 295–296, "The Procession of Life."

<sup>72</sup> *Works*, III, p. 60, "The Great Stone Face."

<sup>73</sup> *Works*, v, pp. 1–2, "The New Adam and Eve."



My dear sir . . . is not Nature better than a book? Is not the human heart deeper than any system of philosophy? Is not life replete with more instruction than past observers have found it possible to write down in maxims? Be of good cheer. The great book of Time is still spread wide open before us; and, if we read it aright, it will be to us a volume of eternal truth.<sup>74</sup>

Art and the realm of the imagination were not final facts but were valuable in educating the soul. As Hawthorne wrote at the end of "The Hall of Fantasy,"

Let us be content, therefore, with merely an occasional visit, for the sake of spiritualizing the grossness of this actual life, and prefiguring to ourselves a state in which the idea shall be all in all.<sup>75</sup>

In the light of his literary theory, Hawthorne appears a less somber individual and a more significant artist than is supposed in much contemporary critical thought. The view that he was a Puritan sermonizer by intent is certainly not borne out by the foregoing investigation; nor is it possible to see him as simply an allegorist. The truth seems to be that an admiration for allegory liberated him from the traditions of English fiction so that in place of a mirror of life he came to require in his writing patterns acceptable both to the senses and to the spirit. It should be noted, however, that his intent for the most part was not to make a dream world like that of *The Faerie Queene* or *The Orlando Furioso* but to idealize life in the manner of Greek tragedy, with which his tragic insight and fine restraint also link him. But just as it is a mistake to see Hawthorne as a moralizing Puritan or to be led by such pieces as "The Hall of Fantasy" to think of him as simply an allegorist, so it is also a mistake to regard him as completely a classicist. His doctrine of idealization suggests Aristotle; his insistence that character is the basis of art suggests Longinus; but the melancholy which pervades his work links him with the seventeenth century essayists. Indeed, in qualities, whatever his origins were, he may be regarded as the meeting ground of several tendencies in seventeenth century English literature: the melancholy tinged with beauty characteristic of Sir Thomas Browne, the love of nature found in the lyric poets and Izaak Walton, the severe and lofty classicism of Milton, and the allegoric attitude and art of John Bunyan. Hawthorne's dual mastery of form and content is unsurpassed in American literature. It is not expecting too much of the future to believe that he will be given his rightful place in the Hall of Fantasy as an Artist of the Beautiful.

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<sup>74</sup> *Works*, v, pp. 219–220, "Earth's Holocaust."

<sup>75</sup> *Works*, iv, p. 258, "The Hall of Fantasy."